Mr. Horst Seehofer
Minister of the Interior, Building and Community
Alt-Moabit 140
10557 Berlin
Germany

Copied: Angela Merkel, Chancellor of Germany
Heiko Maas, Minister of Foreign Affairs

Concerns: **Call to replace Felix Klein as the Federal government Commissioner for the Fight against Antisemitism**

30 April 2020

Dear Minister Seehofer,

We, Jewish scholars and artists from Israel and elsewhere, many of whom specialize in anti-Semitism and in Jewish, Holocaust and Israel Studies, are calling on you to replace Felix Klein, the Federal government Commissioner for Jewish Life in Germany and the Fight against Antisemitism, following his shameful attack on Prof. Achille Mbembe.

As you know, Prof. Achille Mbembe is one of the most important intellectuals in Africa, whose humanistic voice and scholarship is heard and admired globally. We consider Mr. Klein's attempt to frame Prof. Mbembe as an antisemite baseless, inappropriate, offensive and harmful.

We are aware that the attack on Prof. Mbembe was initiated by others, who rejected him as the opening speaker of this year's Ruhrtriennale Festival. Given his official role and responsibility, we find it unacceptable that Mr. Klein joined this attack, which degraded into a witch-hunt.

We are perplexed that Mr. Klein did so without bothering to study Prof. Mbembe's work. Instead, he relied for his allegations on a deeply selective reading and manipulative interpretation of Prof. Mbembe's writings by others. Considering that accusations of antisemitism can ruin someone's reputation, this in itself amounts to severe professional and moral misconduct.

The Ruhrtriennale Festival has been cancelled by now, due to the coronavirus. This incident, however, cannot remain without consequences for Mr. Klein. Apart from the personal and professional harm done to Prof. Mbembe, Mr. Klein has done a disservice to the urgent fight against real antisemitism, casting a shadow over the integrity of his public office.

By accusing Prof. Mbembe of "relativizing the Holocaust", Mr. Klein has also harmed academic freedom. This toxic allegation relates to Prof. Mbembe's study in reference to the Holocaust in comparative context. We wish to be very clear: such study isn't a trivialization of the Holocaust and certainly not antisemitism. It is legitimate, essential and in fact commonplace in Holocaust and genocide studies. Some 600 leading Holocaust scholars recently asserted that banning analogies from the debate about the Holocaust is "a radical position that is far removed from mainstream scholarship on the Holocaust and genocide. And it makes learning from the past almost impossible".

Mr. Klein's attack on Prof. Mbembe fits into a pattern. He has assumed a leading role in the "weaponization" of antisemitism against critics of the Israeli government and activists exercising their freedom of speech and assembly to protest Israel's violations of basic rights of the Palestinians. As an official representative of the German government, Mr. Klein is undermining

the exercise of fundamental freedoms – this should deeply alarm your government, considering its commitment to democratic principles and the rule of law.

Unjustified allegations of antisemitism are increasingly creating a climate of fear in Germany, deterring intellectuals, journalists and the public at large from exercising free speech regarding controversial issues that should be publicly debated. At this very hour, free and critical speech in relation to Israel is needed more than ever. While the world is desperately fighting the coronavirus, the incoming Israeli government is moving towards annexation of vital parts of the occupied Palestinian West Bank – a grave violation of international law, formalizing a situation of two peoples with unequal rights inside one territory.

56 former members of the Knesset, some of whom have served as ministers in various Israeli governments, have recently warned this would establish an Apartheid state in Israel-Palestine.

Does Mr. Klein consider them antisemites? And all others who will speak of inequality and discrimination, after annexation has been implemented? These questions arise after Mr. Klein has accused Prof. Mbembe of antisemitism for allegedly equating Israel with Apartheid South Africa.

In addition, Mr. Klein has promoted and amplified aggressive campaigns against organizations and individuals, some of them Jewish, due to their support for "BDS". He is clearly obsessed by the BDS campaign, which has a miniscule footprint in Germany, and appears to devote more of his time to it than to the acute threat that the surge in far-right antisemitism poses to Jews and Jewish life in Germany.

Our views on BDS differ, but it is entirely clear: BDS as such is not antisemitic and is essentially protected by freedom of speech and freedom of assembly, as also confirmed by several German courts. It is deplorable but unsurprising that the Israeli government is waging war against BDS – but how can a German government official join this war in the frontline?

In this context, we wish to add that this anti-BDS crusade is undeniably contributing to the marginalization of non-white voices and minorities in Germany, fostering racism and nationalistic sentiments. It is a shame that none other than the Federal Commissioner for the Fight against Antisemitism is leading this trend.

We also deplore that Mr. Klein has been encouraging politicized abuse of the IHRA definition, which conflates antisemitism with criticism and activism directed at Israel, to discredit and silence opponents of Israel's policies. Here again, we observe Mr. Klein operating in synergy with the Israeli government.

That same Israeli government is currently preparing for annexation of vital parts of Palestine. It has deliberately weaponized allegations of antisemitism to politically shield this dramatic step and to distract from the documented evidence about its systematic violations of the human rights of the Palestinians.

On numerous occasions since his appointment in May 2018, Mr. Klein has facilitated and legitimized this fatal instrumentalization, which – we wish to repeat – harms the fight against real anti-Semitism. The latest example is his attack on Prof. Mbembe.

For all these reasons, we consider Mr. Klein unqualified and unfit for the important task assigned to him. He is a civil servant that operates and falls under your political responsibility. **We call on you to replace Mr. Klein without delay as the German government Commissioner for Jewish Life and the Fight against Antisemitism.**

Yours sincerely,

Prof. Gadi Algazi, Department of History, Tel Aviv University; Associate Fellow at Re:Work: International Research Center Work and Human Lifecycle in Global History at Humboldt University, Berlin

Dr. Seth Anziska, Department of Hebrew and Jewish Studies, University College London

Prof. Louise Bethlehem, Department of English and the Program in Cultural Studies, The Hebrew University of Jerusalem; recipient European Research Council Consolidators Grant

Prof. Daniel Boyarin, Taubman Professor of Talmudic Culture, University of California, Berkeley; Fellow American Academy of Arts and Sciences; Von Humboldt Senior Laureate

Prof. (emeritus) Jose Brunner, Cohn Institute for the History and Philosophy of Science and Ideas (former director) and Buchmann Faculty of Law; co-founder of Israel's first legal clinic for the rights of Holocaust survivors, Tel Aviv University

Prof. (emerita) Jane Caplan, History Department, University of Oxford; Emeritus Fellow, St. Antony's College, Oxford; Marjorie Walter Goodhart Professor Emeritus of European History, Bryn Mawr College; Visiting Professor, Birkbeck, University of London

Dr. Raya Cohen, formerly Department of Jewish History, Tel Aviv University; formerly Department of Sociology, University of Naples Federico II

Prof. Jean Comaroff, Alfred North Whitehead Professor of African and African American Studies and of Anthropology; Oppenheimer Research Fellow in African Studies, Harvard University

Prof. John Comaroff, Hugh K. Foster Professor of African and African American Studies and of Anthropology; Oppenheimer Research Fellow in African Studies, Harvard University

Prof. Alon Confino, Pen Tishkach Chair of Holocaust Studies, Director of The Institute for Holocaust, Genocide and Memory Studies, Department of History and of Jewish and Near Eastern Studies, University of Massachusetts; recipient of the Humboldt-Stiftung and of the Guggenheim Fellowships

Prof. (emerita) Sidra DeKoven Ezrahi, Department of General and Comparative Literature, The Hebrew University of Jerusalem; recipient of Guggenheim Fellowship

Prof. (emeritus) Gideon Freudenthal, The Cohn Institute for the History and Philosophy of Science and Ideas, Tel Aviv University

Dr. Katharina Galor, Hirschfeld Visiting Associate Professor, Program in Judaic Studies, Brown University

Prof. Amos Goldberg, Department of Jewish History and Contemporary Jewry, The Hebrew University of Jerusalem

Prof. Neve Gordon, School of Law, Marie Curie Fellow, Queen Mary University of London

Dr. Ilana Hammerman, Writer, recipient of the Yeshayahu Leibowitz Prize

Prof. David Harel, Department of Computer Science and Applied Mathematics, The Weizmann Institute of Science; recipient of the Israel Prize and of the EMET Prize

Prof. Eva Illouz, The Department of Sociology and Anthropology, The Hebrew University of Jerusalem; The European Centre for Sociology and Political Science, Paris; recipient of the Anneliese Meier International Award for Excellence in Research from the Alexander von Humboldt-Foundation and of the EMET Prize

Dani Karavan, Sculptor, projects include the Memorial to the Sinti and Roma victims of National Socialism in Berlin, the Regensburg Synagogue Memorial and the Way of Human Rights in Nuremberg; recipient of the Israel Prize

Miki Kratsman, Photographer; former head of the Photography Department at Bezalel Academy of Arts and Design; recipient of the EMET Prize

Alex Levac, Photographer, recipient of the Israel Prize

Prof. (emeritus) Yehuda Judd Ne'eman, Tel Aviv University, recipient of the Israel Prize

Dr. (emeritus) Mark Levene, Department of History, University of Southampton UK; Parkes Centre for Jewish/non-Jewish Relations; recipient of the Lemkin Prize of the Institute for the Study of Genocide

Prof. Neil Levi, English Department (chair), Drew University

Dr. Anat Matar, Department of Philosophy, Tel Aviv University

Prof. (emeritus) Paul Mendes-Flohr, Dorothy Grant Maclear Professor Emeritus of Modern Jewish History and Thought and Associate Faculty in the Department of History, The University of Chicago Divinity School; Professor Emeritus of Jewish Thought, The Hebrew University of Jerusalem

Prof. Isaac Nevo, Department of Philosophy, Ben-Gurion University of the Negev

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Prof. Nurit Peled-Elhanan, School of Education, The Hebrew University of Jerusalem; The David Yellin Academic College of Education; co-recipient of the Sakharov Prize

Prof. Amnon Raz-Krakotzkin, Department of Jewish History, Ben-Gurion University of the Negev, recipient of the Zalman Shazar Prize for Jewish History

Prof. (emerita) Shlomith Rimmon-Kenan, Departments of English Literature and Comparative Literature, The Hebrew University of Jerusalem; member of the Israel Academy of Sciences and Humanities

Prof. Ishay Rosen-Zvi, Head of the Talmud and Late Antiquity section, The Department of Jewish Philosophy and Talmud, Tel Aviv University

Prof. Michael Rothberg, 1939 Society Samuel Goetz Chair in Holocaust Studies, Department of Comparative Literature, University of California

Prof. Catherine Rottenberg, Department of American and Canadian Studies, University of Nottingham

Prof. Barry Trachtenberg, Michael R. and Deborah K. Rubin Presidential Chair of Jewish History, Department of History, Wake Forest University

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